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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 006798

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL:10/26/2015

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION POLITICIAN PESSIMISTIC ON SOUTH, PARTY PROSPECTS

REF: BANGKOK 6240

CLASSIFIED BY POLITICAL COUNSELOR SUSAN M. SUTTON, reason 1.4 (b) (d)

1. (C) Summary: A Democrat party MP gave downbeat assessments of his party's short term prospects, and of the security situation in the troubled South. The MP warned that the current government would be unable to resolve the problems in the South because it had completely lost the trust of the people. Meanwhile, the PM was not too concerned, as his nationalist rhetoric on the issue was actually winning him support around the country. The Democrat party must rebuild from the grass roots, in the MP's view, and cannot rely on a "people power" type revolt to unseat the prime minister and his powerful Thai Rak Thai party. His view of the South is overly pessimistic, we believe, but he is probably right about his own party's weakness in the face of a still-strong TRT. End summary.

Prospects for the South -- bad

2. (C) Polcouns met with Sukhumbrand Paribatra, a party list MP and Democrat Party (DP) leader. Sukhumbrand echoed the concerns of other DP interlocutors in assessing the situation in the South. He respected the members of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) but doubted whether their work could have much impact. At this point, he said, it won't help even if the government comes up with a good solution to respond to the core problems in the South. The government itself is the problem, and more specifically the Prime Minister. The people in the South have no faith in the government or PM anymore and will not trust anything they do.

3. (C) Further, Thaksin has little incentive to make concessions that might help quiet the problems in the South. Thaksin's nationalist rhetoric is still popular with the people in the rest of the country. "For every one enemy he makes in the South, he gets ten supporters," Sukhumbrand claimed. Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party is prepared to concede the South to the opposition. "What does it matter that he loses 40-50 MPs from the South, if he wins everywhere else in the country?" Sukhumbrand asked.

Prospects for the opposition -- bad

4. (C) Polcouns asked what the Democrat Party strategy would be for the Senate elections next year. "Shall I tell you honestly? We will get on our knees and pray," Sukhumbrand said. He expected that TRT would "use state power" and their control over the media so effectively that the DP and other opposition parties would not have a chance. DP was also to blame; for many years it had been "coasting," certain that it would muster enough seats to have a role in any coalition government. The dramatic losses in 2001 and this year had shaken up the party, and now they would have to rebuild. The new party leader, Abhisit Vejjajiva, had told the party that it must now compete to win, not just to be part of a coalition.

5. (C) In the by-elections on October 30, the opposition could only hope to gain one or two seats. It had hoped to win three of the four contests, reaching 125 seats in the Parliament; this is the number needed to initiate censure and impeachment motions. Sukhumbrand did not expect to succeed. The opposition would take the seat in Satun in the South, which TRT had decided not to contest (unless low turn-out rendered the election void). The opposition had a chance Phichit, which has been hotly contested. In Uthai Thani, "all that matters is money" and TRT has more of it. In Singburi,

the opposition candidate has not maintained good contact with his constituency, and so is not expected to do well.

16. (C) Polcouns asked about the impact of the Auditor-General scandal (reftel) and the efforts by opposition groups to gin up widespread public discontent and anti-government demonstrations over the issue. Sukhumbrand discounted the effect of the scandal. "It's too complicated," he said, "I had to have it explained to me twice."
(Comment: us, too. end comment.) If the public does rise up against the government, it would probably be over some simple issue that no one can now predict, like the death of a family from bird flu. He drew a parallel with the student demonstrations of the past, which had grown out of narrow grievances.

Comment

17. (C) Sukhumbrand gave a more realistic assessment of the political situation than we have heard from many other opposition and civil society figures. His view that the party cannot count on public unrest and "people power" revolt against Thaksin is probably unwelcome among many of his colleagues, who would like to avoid the long, hard job of building grassroots support around the country. His assessment of the South may be too grim, in our view. We don't think that it is yet too late for good government policies effectively implemented to improve the conditions in the South. Unfortunately, the situation might reach that point if the government doesn't work more effectively soon.

BOYCE